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Inauthentic engagement: the role of self-presentation in consumer engagement behaviour

Abstract

The role of consumers has evolved over time, with consumers becoming more active contributors to the activities of firms (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010). This blurring of boundaries has resulted in an evolution of firms' marketing strategies, in which many firms now desire deeper engagement from customers (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). Engagement is broadly understood as a genuine disposition of a customer towards a brand, associated with the voluntary contribution of resources (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). To this extent, accepted engagement antecedents are seen as representing genuine acts of consumers (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Consumer engagement is amplified through the ubiquity and functionality of social media platforms, which provide countless opportunities for a brand to continuously interact and develop relationships with consumers (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015). However, this new form of brand engagement on social media may also cause a shift in the interactions of users. Rather than interaction with a brand to reflect a genuine disposition of a product or service, social media allows individuals to engage with brands as part of ideal self-construction through a self-presentation process. Thus, brand engagement on social media may not reflect consumers' genuine behaviour. This research explores of the potential for 'inauthentic engagement' within social media.

Data were collected through thirty semi-structured interviews with Facebook users covering 11 nationalities, using the projective technique of asking interviewees to comment on their own Facebook news feed and posts. The findings identify three types of inauthentic engagement, reflecting varying degrees of inauthenticity and which include: staged engagement, spurious engagement and fake engagement, which come with diverse drivers – self-differentiation, self-enhancement, concern for others, group belonging and attention seeking.

Given that most firms currently employ engagement marketing strategies that are perceived to reflect genuine brand engagement by consumers (Harmeling *et al.*, 2017), this research implies that the results of firms' existing strategies could be questionable when consumer engagement is no longer based on a genuine disposition to engage. This research expands awareness of the nuances of consumer brand engagement within social media. The research diverges from traditional investigations of engagement, which assume a genuine disposition associated with long-term commitment to a focal object (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017). This research will have important implications for companies in terms of their ability to identify inauthentic engagement and design effective strategies to place greater emphasis on self-presentation to encourage consumers to engage through brand association. Consequently, when firms recognise this informed perspective, they are able to capture more engagement from every aspect of consumers' segmentation on social media. Indeed, inauthentic engagement could damage a firm's efforts because people are making decisions as a result. As existing research suggest that online engagement has an effect on brand performance, and ultimately sales (Malthouse *et al.*, 2016; Yang *et al.*, 2016); therefore, engagement that is inauthentic could also have some effect on this.

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